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Ephesians 5:19-20

THANKSGIVING SERMONS ARE EASY OR ARE THEY?

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Of all the sermons that I write over the course of the year, Thanksgiving sermons are the easiest to write. In fact they are so easy to write that you could probably write one. There are many texts that you could choose where you didn't have to have any experience in the original Biblical languages of Hebrew or Greek. The words are pretty self-explanatory. You find reasons to be thankful and you encourage people to be thankful. I believe that you could do that and do it well. But there are also many people who could not write a good Thanksgiving sermon because they cannot find reasons to be thankful. THANKSGIVING SERMONS ARE EASY OR ARE THEY?

Where do we begin? Let's start with the words of our text: "Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." It is going to start with an attitude, an attitude of gratitude. We are so thankful that we sing and make music in our hearts. You know that kind of feeling, don't you? There are days and occasions when we just have to sing. There are times when I'm all alone in the car and a certain song comes on the radio and I'm singing at the top of my lungs. The people in the car next to me wonder what kind of nut I am, but I have to belt it out. I have found that there are many hymns that get me into the right mood. There are Advent hymns and Christmas hymns and Lenten hymns and Easter hymns. There are hymns for all kinds of Christian occasions. I simply don't have a favorite hymn. I believe that I can honestly say that there are at least 100 different hymns that may be my favorite on a given day. Perhaps you can say the same.

What makes a good hymn? Certainly the melody has a lot to do with it. The most important thing is what that hymn says. Hymns may certainly touch our emotions, but they must also touch our intellect. A great hymn will always focus on our Lord Jesus Christ and on what he has done for us. That will always give us our reasons to be thankful for everything.

Thankfulness is always a matter of the heart. If our hearts are not right, we cannot be thankful. You have met many people throughout your life's journey who are not thankful people. Their hearts are filled with hate and bitterness. They will never find a reason to be thankful, no matter what they have, no matter what they get. You might think that if you had what they have, you would never stop praising God and they never do. It isn't a matter of what you have or what you don't have. I have found many people that you would consider very blessed who are not thankful people and I have found many people whose blessings appear to be far less who rejoice constantly. It is all a matter of the heart.

Thanksgiving is a national holiday so perhaps as we make our list of blessings we can begin there. The United States has been blessed as few nations in the history of the world have been. Yes, we do have our problems. We do have many shameful moments in our past. We are a nation of sinners. We have people who have followed their lusts and greed for wealth and power and hurt other people. We cannot make excuses for that. But we have also been a nation that has been a blessing to many people both here and throughout the world. America has fought for freedom. We have fought against dictators and communism and against those who want to destroy our freedoms. We have the freedom to worship. No one has forced you to come here this evening. We are happy that you are here. Some have chosen not to attend. They may have good or not so good reasons for doing so, but they do have that freedom.

There are many other freedoms that the American people enjoy. We have the freedom of the press and freedom of speech. People can say and do unpopular things and they are not put into prison for it. We may strongly disagree with their stance, but we respect their right to it. We may pray that their outlooks and attitudes will change, but we are happy for that freedom. Ours is not a dictatorship. It is a government of the people, by the people and for the people. It may change in the future, but as for now we enjoy that. We thank God for the blessings of freedom and liberty and for those who have given their lives so that we can enjoy those blessings.

Have you ever stopped to thank God for the geographical position of our nation? We are not too far north where there is constant frost and snow and not too far south where there is always oppressive heat. Here in Michigan we enjoy all four seasons. You are never too hot or never too cold. We have lakes and rivers and beauty all around us. We are a land of plenty from the mountains to the valleys to the oceans white with foam. We pray, "God bless America, our home sweet home!" and we are thankful for it.

Thanksgiving is also a home day. Tomorrow most of us will gather with our families for dinner. We will visit old memories and make new ones. How many of our greatest blessings come from family? We think of our parents who raised us, who sacrificed for us. We didn't fully appreciate it at the time, but as we got married and had children of our own, we realized what our parents did and sacrificed. We had our brothers and sisters. Even though we may have fought with them, we would be the first to fight for them when they were under attack from someone else. There is the wider circle of family: our grandparents, our aunts and uncles and cousins. There are those who are not family by blood, but they will always be part of our lives, brothers and sisters from different mothers and fathers. Many memories will come from Thanksgiving Days past and present.

Thanksgiving is also a church day. It is truly appropriate that Thanksgiving comes at the end of the church year. What a wonderful way to end the church year with a special service of thankfulness and praise for God's blessings. You cannot have a Thanksgiving celebration without God. You must be thankful to someone. Most of the world doesn't know who that is. They might say that they are thankful to some god, be it Allah or the Force or what have you. We know that not only there is a God, we know who the true God is. He is one God in three distinct Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This God is all powerful. He created the universe with the power of his Word. But he didn't merely create it and leave it at that. He knows each and every one of us individually. He knows us by name. He knows the very number of hairs on our heads. He knows our strengths and weaknesses. He knows that we are sinners who cannot live up to the demands of his holy Law. He therefore planned and carried out our salvation. In love he sent his only-begotten Son into the world. Jesus lived the perfect life that we could not live. He died the death that our sins deserved. Because of what Jesus did, we are pardoned, unconditionally. God's justice has been satisfied. We have once again been brought into God's family. We have an eternal home and inheritance in a place called heaven. We are privileged to come to this house of worship and have our faith strengthened through God's Word. We have the opportunity to receive our Savior's very body and blood in Holy Communion. We are given more people to love and to serve. We see that life is always about love, not love of self, but rather love of others. We show our love for God as we show our love for one another.

Thanksgiving is a holiday for the individual. There are certain things for which you should be thankful. They affect you and you alone. You can thank God for your personal health, a sound mind and a healthy body. You can thank God for a job or retirement or the ability to attend school or many other things. You can thank him for your home and its furnishings, your car, your clothing, your food and your recreation. You can thank him for your hobbies and your

friends. You can thank him for putting you here in this place at this particular time. You can thank him and then ask, "Lord, how can I serve you with the gifts you have given me?"

But what if things haven't gone so well for you? Paul tells us that we should always be giving thanks for everything, yes, even those things that we might consider to be painful. We live in a world of sin. We are constantly reminded of that. Light and darkness, safety and danger, prosperity and adversity, joy and pain mingle in the cup of life. There are times when humanly speaking, things couldn't be going better. And there are times when we deal with one tragedy over another. Finances are always fluctuating. Stock markets rise, stock markets fall. Sometimes our job is great and we are working overtime. Other times we may not have a job at all. Some cars may need minimal maintenance and other cars always seem to be in the shop. We may go for years without any serious health problems and then we may have one thing after another. And then there is the matter of death. There are years when we deal with the deaths of so many precious family members and friends. Our hearts break with the pain.

Can we still be thankful? Absolutely! The apostle Paul reminds us, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." We don't always know what God has in store for us but we trust him. As Joseph was sold into slavery and languishing in prison, do you think that he imagined that he would rise to the position of second-in-command of all Egypt and would save the very brothers who had sold him into slavery? God has a plan, a plan to draw us closer to him, a plan to increase our trust, a plan to help us see that the true treasures are not the things of this world. Even as we lose loved ones to death, we have the assurance that we have not lost them, but will see them again in the glories of heaven. We thank God for all things, even those that are very painful.

We know that we have not always been thankful. We have whined and complained and felt that God has been unfair to us. Satan is always there whispering in our ear. We ask God for his forgiveness through Christ. We know that we have it. We are assured of that personally in a few more minutes in the Lord's Supper. Thanksgiving sermons are easy to write. They are not always easy to live. God can make that difference. Lord, give us an attitude of gratitude! Make us truly thankful! AMEN.